How to Use Blogs in Creating Special Opportunities for Language Learning

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Abstract

Nowadays the need to teach students using Weblogs has become one of the most important issues discussed by teachers and researchers. Information and communication technologies have been an integral part of our life, providing different opportunities in learning English as a second language. The aim of this study is to investigate how it is possible to use Web 2.0. technologies to create additional opportunities for language learning. We overview the benefits of using blogs in a language classroom, possible ways of teaching English to engineering students using Web 2.0. technology as a learning tool. The major findings of this research proved that integration of blogs greatly contributes to the process of foreign language teaching and learning. Finally, practical recommendations, including the information about the blog and some kinds of tasks have been given to educators and researchers.

Keywords: Weblog, information and communication technologies (ICT), feedback principle, motivation, efficient instrument;

1. Introduction

The modern concept of higher education is marked by the evolution, describing a new era in the development of humanity. The term evolution "is widely spread in special and imaginative literature and journalistic lexis" (Ptashkin, 2014). Concerning teaching English as a second language at universities the main aim is to develop not only communicative and sociocultural competence, but also to develop information competence to use Internet resources for successful communication in a foreign language with the help of information and communication technologies (thereafter ICT). The term "Information and communication technologies" is defined as a collection of services, applications and technologies, referring to various devices, which function through networking and telecommunications (Myslihaka, 2014).

The use of information and communication technologies was investigated by numerous researchers for different purposes: for effective and efficient institutional administration (Onyije & Opara, 2013), for exploring multimedia-based enrichment for foreign language teaching (Hertsch, M., 2103), for exploring students' perceptions of blogs during teaching practice placements (Van Wyk, 2013); for studying the role of social media in developing an effective knowledge management process in professional service firms (Shah, Khan, & Amjad, 2013).

Among information and communications technologies Web 2.0 technologies are in high demand nowadays as they provide different educational tools for learning foreign languages, being timely, adequate and individual.

The benefits of Web 2.0 technologies have been observed by numerous researchers (Baxter 2010, Connolly, 2010, Stansfield, 2010); microblogs of scientists in e-learning (Kieslinger, Ebner, Wiesenhofer, 2011); various Web 2.0 tools for e-learning have been presented (Banday, 2012; Wang & Vasquez, 2012); the usage of a blog in corporate communication (Agerdal-Hjermin, 2014); reflective writing and interactive exchange through blogging in an advanced language course (Lee, 2010). The challenges facing the integration of ICT in teaching and learning activities (Mathevula & Uwizeyimana, 2014) have been explored. Different researchers suggest that educators have become more and more motivated to use ICT in the educational process.

Although psychological readiness of engineering students and technical readiness of teachers to create special opportunities for language learning using blogs as educational tools haven't been observed yet. To achieve this aim it's better to explore how blogs can be implemented in the process of teaching and learning English as a second language to combine theoretical knowledge with practical usage of blogs.

A set of practical guidelines for implementing blogs has been provided to teachers and researchers interested in using ICT in an ESL classroom.

2. Literature Review

A literature review will be used to study different definitions of blogs and their implementation in the process of learning English as a second language. Also the example of using a blog to teach engineering students will be provided.

A number of definitions of the term "blog" have been found in researches.

Moon & Lim defined Weblogs "as free, user-friendly websites that are easily created, maintained, and updated without any knowledge of HTML, offer huge possibilities for innovative learning in classrooms, across disciplines and in various levels" (Moon & Lim, 2013).

"A blog is a site or online journal published on the World Wide Web (WWW) for discussion or informational purposes in a reverse chronological order" (Blood, 2000).

"A weblog (or 'blog') can be thought of as an online journal that an individual can continuously update with his or her own words, ideas, and thoughts through software that enables one to easily do so. Unlike a standard website, weblog entries are made by typing directly into the browser and with the click of a button are instantly published on the internet. All basic document formatting, like spacing, bold, italics, underline, and creating links, requires no knowledge of HTML or FTP (File Transfer Protocol), so that anyone who can type, copy, and paste can create and maintain a weblog" (Campbell, 2003).

According to Webster's Dictionary a blog is " 1) a Web site that contains online personal reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer; 2) the contents of such a site"(Webster's Dictionary, 2014).

With the emergence of Web 2.0., communication and cooperation have become more important than the technologies themselves. Blogs used for educational purposes are called "edublogs" (Audin, 2014). "Weblogs have become one of the best-received Web 2.0 technologies in foreign language education"(Moon & Lim, 2013).

One of the most distinguishing features of blogs is that any person can open a blog. It differs blogs from email. Students can visit blogs using mobile devices from their personal accounts in any place and at any time.

Izquierdo and Reyes offer the following features of blogs which are unique and differ blogs from other information and communication technologies:

1) Relevance which is provided with the opportunity of blogs to allow teachers and learners to upload content relevant to their courses and promote student-teacher, student-student, and student-others interactions about the postings.

2) Accessibility. Weblogs are accessible to anyone who is interested in communicating with each other without attending face-to-face classes, for those who are short of time and have no opportunities to attend all the classes.

3) Interactivity. Webloggers can select other blogs through a list of given links, or users can subscribe to other blogs and look through their tasks and activities.

4) Interest. Weblogs give students equal opportunities to take part in all activities, which have the potential to enhance students' interest and motivation in learning foreign languages (Izquierdo & Reyes, 2009).

Taking into account the features mentioned above, we consider the following blog's characteristics: interactivity, efficiency, multimedia implementation, availability and keeping large amounts of information. As for blog's didactic features they include: motivation of cognitive activity, a favorable environment for individual training, development of learner's autonomy, creativity, ability to moderate a discussion, empathy, improvement of writing skills, forming creative thinking and receptive skills.

Nowadays, the main challenge facing the teacher of foreign languages, is to develop and implement methods of organized and systematic use of information and communication technologies for educational purposes. This aim is also caused by a sheer necessity to motivate learners to use mobile devices and their applications in learning foreign languages and the need to minimize the harm caused by uncontrolled use of gadgets in the educational process.

Blogs can help solve all the problems mentioned, but it's necessary to plan the lesson carefully, analyze all the tasks offered to students.

Blogs make easier:
- The implementation of feedback principle;
  Raising students' motivation;
- The implementation of the three basic principles of learning: repetition, support, practices, correlated with the main features of the Internet (search for information and communication);
- The promotion of students' autonomy;
- Developing reading, listening, writing and speaking skills.

The advantages of using blogs in teaching and learning English as a second language are obvious. They are the

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following: authentic learning environment for communication in a foreign language, getting learning experience through online learning and improving students' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills (Campbell, 2003; Noytim, 2010;).

With the help of Weblogs new formats of tasks, interactive exercises can be implemented successfully.

3. Research Methodology

The paper outlines the methodology for the survey, including pedagogical objectives, task design, selection of a blog as a web tool and its implementation in the learning process. We use the following methods in our research: the analysis, the review of literature, observing our own professional experience with data analysis.

According to the aim of this study, including investigation of Web 2.0. technologies to create additional opportunities for language learning, we've formulated the following pedagogical objectives:

1) To investigate the effectiveness of blogs in teaching English at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University.
2) To create a blog which allows engineering students to learn English successfully.
3) To overview the benefits of using blogs in a language classroom.
4) To describe possible ways of teaching English to technical students using Web 2.0 technologies.

To achieve the first and the second objectives, we've created our own blog called "Learning English" (http://annaburan.blogspot.ru), for teaching English students of Tomsk Polytechnic University.

A total number of second-year students having participated in this survey is over one hundred. After a year of using a blog we can describe the achievement of our third objective which includes the overview of the benefits of using blogs in a language classroom. These benefits are the following:

- Students have improved their reading skills, dealing with large amount of information.
- They have enhanced writing skills, while creating their comments as well as completing writing tasks and tests.
- Motivation to learn the English language has also increased.
- Working autonomously and independently has raised students' self-confidence.
- Watching the video has developed listening skills and classroom discussions have improved speaking skills either.

Our blog (http://annaburan.blogspot.ru) helps engineering students not only improve all their language skills while learning the English language, but find necessary information about all their homeworks, conferences, individual tasks, instructions how to make presentations, information about requirements for credits and exams. Our blog contains reference materials (dictionaries, encyclopedias), as well as multimedia materials (presentations, audio and video). Currently, a blog has become an integral part of the educational process. It includes online exercises and tests, multimedia, links to additional resources and reference materials. Students can work with such materials, using mobile devices. With the help of blogs students receive a new form of interaction with the teacher and within the group. On the one hand, teachers should be highly-qualified, because they need to use a special format at each stage of their foreign language course: from the introduction of the new material to skills development. On the other hand, blog's implementation helps us overcome different challenges through informing students and avoid unnecessary questions about curriculum, requirements, deadlines, homeworks, additional materials.

One of the factors of using blogs is to identify students' willingness to use them, which implies the availability of information and communication technologies, the interest of students in this process and the possibility of Internet access in the classroom and at home. Nowadays young people are ready to use information and communication technologies in their studies. And we can even talk about a partial substitution of traditional print textbooks by mobile devices.

We find the following communicative tasks from our blog useful and important:

- Read the information about Russian scientists and inventors and tell what you have known about the impact of Russians in the World of Science.
- Make the sentences, using the words about Power Engineering and use them to describe your future profession.
- Be ready to describe the job you would like to have in the future, using the vocabulary.
- Watch the video "What is Engineering?" and try to say what you have understood.
- Be ready to ask ten questions at a job interview.
- Say if a big company is a good place to work or not.
- Would you like to be a big boss?
- Read about "Top ten qualities of a great engineer", and say which of them you've got.

- Ask a foreign student coming to Tomsk Polytechnic University any questions you like.
- Find any solutions to the problems with traffic jams and car parking space in Russia and in any other country.
- Give your opinion about Internet addiction.
- If you had a chance to study abroad, what university would you choose to study?
- Describe what a successful career means to you.
- Say a few words about modern devices you couldn't live without.
- Give examples, proving that children are better than their parents at using the Internet.
- Describe how time management help students plan their time.
- Could the Internet become more dangerous than the real world?
- Describe the pros and cons of social networking.

The tasks mentioned above, let learners speak freely, develop students' communicative skills and show how it is important to be ready psychologically to use information and communication technologies.

4. Findings and Discussion

The result of our survey has shown that about 80-85% of the students actively use blogs in studies and different mobile applications in everyday life, that indicates students' information competence. With regard to the use of mobile devices, more than half of the students find it necessary to exchange materials, as well as, create mobile application of study courses. Blogs can help teachers fulfil students' requirements and expectations. Almost half of those, taken part in our survey use podcasts, about one-third of respondents like a mobile testing provided on the blog, 100 % of students look through individual tasks and try to complete them on time.

We can summarize that after a year of using a blog as an educational tool for learning English as a second language engineering students have become more confident, motivated and independent. They have improved their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills, developed analytical and critical thinking skills.

5. Concluding Remarks

Our survey indicated that a blog is an efficient instrument which helps organize all the material for the process of learning. New technologies motivate students, providing a lot of opportunities for studying and teaching. Nowadays we have a vast amount of data and it's important to structure everything to provide students with necessary information in a short time. While using blogs students are involved in skimming, scanning, listening, writing, as well as, solving problems, thinking critically and changing their attitudes. Blogs give the opportunities to use additional material at home and in classrooms, do assignments with instant feedback, have guided and free discussions with peers (Buran, Simavin, 2014). Although there are many unanswered questions, concerning the usage of blogs in teaching and learning foreign languages, many researchers have proved their positive influence on the educational process. Opportunities of educational blogs are enormous as they provide additional educational tools for teachers and learners. Teachers must be ready to integrate blogs into their practice as students are eager to use information and communication technologies in their studies. Nowadays we need more investigations, concerning the usage of weblogs to understand the future of weblogs and offer more effective learning tools that can help learn foreign languages successfully.

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